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Extended Abstract

Representation of Teachers' Perceptions of the Consequences of Curriculum Overload on Elementary School Students

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Introduction

Curriculum overload in elementary education presents a profound and widespread challenge– particularly acute in Iran but also visible in other education systems worldwide. This excessive burden—exceeding the mental and physical capacities of young children—undermines the very foundation of balanced child development (Kumar & Ranjan, 2025). At the elementary stage, children require not only instruction in academic subjects but also ample time for play, social interaction, hands-on experiences, and rest, all essential for their holistic growth and well-being. Unfortunately, the current educational approach emphasizes volume over quality, leading to chronic stress, disengagement, and diminishing eagerness to learn (Sobieraj et al. 2025). Such overpressure frequently results in lower academic performance, behavioral problems, and even long-term psychological issues (Janota & Štirn, 2024). Scientifically, this period is critical as children's brains rapidly develop key cognitive functions like attention, memory, creativity, and problem-solving (Kolanczyk et al. 2025). Overloading young

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learners disrupts these natural developmental processes, causing fatigue, irritability, sleep disturbances, and ultimately impairing not only academic performance but also emotional and social health. Thus, the overload not only threatens educational outcomes but also jeopardizes children's overall mental and physical well-being (Dhaliwal & Srinivasan, 2025). The roots of this issue in Iran are complex, involving policy and cultural dimensions. Educational policies prioritizing the quantity of content rather than its relevance and depth, combined with poor alignment and integration of curricula, place students and teachers under tremendous pressure (Dianabasi et al. 2020). Families' cultural expectations for high academic achievement further intensify this stress, while school administrations struggle with time and resource management. This creates an environment where students are burdened by excessive, often irrelevant, rote learning tasks, and teachers are forced to cover vast content rapidly, leaving little room for meaningful understanding or creativity. Compared with leading education systems globally, Iran's traditional and rigid approach stands in stark contrast (Askary et al. 2025), Countries like Finland and Japan emphasize a learner-centered curriculum, integrating play, social-emotional learning, and life skills with academics. Finnish schools foster calm, supportive environments where teachers tailor lessons to students' needs, focusing more on skill mastery than sheer content volume. Japanese education carefully balances homework and social skill development, ensuring students maintain harmony between academic goals and personal growth (Lagawid, 2024). These nations also leverage modern educational technologies to diversify learning and engage students actively, promoting deep understanding over memorization.

Addressing curriculum overload is essential to transforming Iran's elementary education and nurturing future generations equipped for a complex world. Effective strategies include reducing textbook material by eliminating redundant and nonessential content and shifting towards project-based and skill-focused learning that encourages critical thinking and creativity (Olugbenga et al. 2023). Engaging teachers and parents collaboratively in curriculum design can ensure that educational content matches children's developmental stages and real-life needs. Moreover, adopting dynamic, technology-supported learning environments offers promising ways to inspire and motivate young learners while accommodating diverse learning styles (Trujillo et al. 2024).

Equally important is directing attention to children's psychological, emotional, and social health by providing spaces for play, social engagement, and self-expression within the school day (Brown, 2025).

To improve, educational systems must review their curriculum models. This review should be done with the well-being of teachers and students in mind, improving academic performance, and deepening learning (Loane, 2025). Attention to students' social needs, the relationship between quality and quantity

of learning, focusing on big concepts and ideas, and meaningful learning are among these considerations.
In the Iranian context, additional challenges—such as misalignment with industry needs, weak international benchmarking, and excessive centralization in curriculum development— exacerbate the problem, with curriculum overload emerging as the most critical issue (Bamedhaf et al. 2025). This issue becomes even more important in the elementary school, when students' personalities are formed. The purpose of the present study is to analyze the perception of elementary school teachers of the consequences of textbook overload and to answer the question: "What consequences does the overload of the curriculum have on elementary school students?

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach to explore elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding the effects of curriculum overload on students. It focuses on capturing participants' accounts, minimizing interpretation bias. Purposive maximum– variation sampling was employed to select diverse teachers from various school types in Tehran, with fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews achieving data saturation. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s seven-step method, which yielded three main thematic categories—functional, psychological, and behavioral consequences—along with several subthemes and indicators. Rigorous validation procedures, including peer debriefing and participant verification, ensured the study’s credibility and ethical standards. The findings provide reliable and meaningful insights that can inform educational policies and practices addressing curriculum overload in elementary education.

Findings

The primary aim of this section is not to evaluate the accuracy of teachers’ perceptions, but to describe, analyze, and represent the depth of their insights regarding the potential consequences of curriculum overload on both their teaching performance and students’ academic outcomes. Participants were asked, “What consequences can you envision for teachers?”
Numerous responses were collected, some of which reflected a highly pessimistic view, describing the situation as having no strengths.
A continuous and thorough analysis of interviewees’ responses, categorized by frequency, led to the identification of three main themes, eight sub-themes, and 23 indicators. The structure of these themes and sub-themes is presented in the following.

Theme 1: Functional Consequences

- Classroom Disruption: includes two indicators—"irregular attendance in class" and "restlessness during class".
- Inactivity in Class: includes two indicators—"poor concentration and attention" and "lack of receptiveness to teacher suggestions".
- Inappropriate Learning Habits: includes four indicators—"wasting time," "poor problem-solving," "rote memorization," and "poor planning by students".

Theme 2: Psychological Consequences

- Learned Helplessness: three indicators—"depression and frustration," "reduced well-being," and "low resilience".
- Academic Burnout: three indicators—"lack of motivation," "disinterest," and "boredom".
- Negative Emotions and Feelings: two indicators—"reduced self-confidence" and "high anxiety and stress".

Theme 3: Behavioral Consequences

- Unhealthy Competition: three indicators—"jealousy," "lying," and "cheating."
- Impulsivity: two indicators—"harming others" and "expressing violence and anger".

Conclusion

Curriculum overload refers to the situation where there is too much content to be taught within limited instructional time, leading to an overwhelming workload for teachers and shallow learning experiences for students. This overload can arise from curriculum expansion—adding new topics without removing outdated ones—and imbalance, where some subjects receive excessive focus at the expense of others. Its consequences include teacher stress, reduced teaching effectiveness, and diminished student engagement and understanding (El Khayati et al. 2025)

Research indicates that curriculum overload is a prevalent issue internationally. It is often intensified by continuous educational reforms and societal demands to include new areas, such as social-emotional learning, without adjusting existing content. While adapting curricula to evolving needs is beneficial, failing to manage content volume or time allocation can disrupt teaching quality and student learning (Dejković, 2025). However, the research is limited by variations in educational contexts, making it difficult to generalize effects uniformly. Additionally, perceptions of overload can vary among teachers and students, complicating measurement and intervention efforts.

The following section presents several recommendations.

- To foster a supportive and positive environment, teaching cognitive-behavioral coping skills and balancing academic workload with rest and recreation are essential to prevent burnout. Activities like group sports and art

therapy help reduce depression, while group-based and interactive lessons enhance motivation and a sense of belonging. Addressing academic failure and boosting resilience requires multi-level psychological interventions, active participation, and opportunities for small successes.

- Social-emotional skill development—such as self-awareness, empathy, and communication—strengthens students' ability to manage stress and adapt. Peer support and family involvement further reinforce resilience. Incorporating resilience training into curricula and preparing teachers in psychological issues better equips students for academic challenges.
- To reduce negative behavioral outcomes like jealousy, cheating, lying, and anger, education should focus on individual progress rather than comparison. Promoting empathy, cooperative activities, creative assessments, ethical education, and open communication helps build trust and reduce anxiety. Managing challenging behaviors involves social skills training, conflict resolution, safe emotional expression, and teaching constructive assertiveness and anger control techniques.

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